

Media Capital or media deficit? Representations of women in leadership roles in old and new media.

Abstract: This paper will focus primarily on how women in leadership roles are represented in the media using a feminist critical discourse approach (FCDA). There is a tendency amongst some feminist media analysts to homogenise *all* media as sexist, but contradictory tendencies are evident, especially with the rise of new media platforms. On the one hand, the news value of 'unexpectedness' (Galtung and Ruge, 1965) affords women in prominent leadership roles relatively high media capital. On the other, even ostensibly positive coverage can help to reinforce the limited and limiting perceptions of women that circulate in the mediatized public sphere. For instance, the hybridised gendered interactional and rhetorical styles favoured by many women in public sphere roles (Mullany 2011) have led to them being evaluated as inauthentic by mainstream media institutions. This paper will investigate these contradictory tendencies through a focus on case study evidence of dominant media constructions of British, Irish and US female political leaders. The paper will conclude by considering briefly the use of Twitter, blogs and other new media platforms by high profile women in politics in order to bypass the persistent interpretative control exercised by some mainstream media institutions.

1.1 Introduction:

This paper will use a feminist critical discourse approach (FCDA) to investigate recent media representations of a number of key female political leaders in Britain, Ireland and the US to see if anything has changed from the rather depressing picture encountered when I researched this topic more than fourteen years ago. As numerous studies have shown, the performance of women in leadership roles is often measured against prevailing masculinist discursive norms, with the result that they are found wanting (Cameron 2007; Mullany 2007, 2011; Baxter 2010; Holmes and Marra 2011). One solution to offset negative perceptions of their voice quality and interactional style has been for some female leaders to shift *between* differently gendered styles in different settings, but this in turn can lead to perceptions of a lack of consistency and authenticity, thus foregrounding the proverbial 'double bind' for women who seek high profile public sphere roles. As Deborah Cameron (2003: 463) points out, 'Nobody ever said approvingly of Margaret Thatcher that she was "in touch with her masculine side", whereas both Bill Clinton and Tony Blair were praised for being in touch with their feminine side'. My focus in this paper will be on critical scrutiny of what Toolan (1997: 263) refers to as 'habituated patterns of use' in mainstream media coverage of men

and women in leadership roles, and on 'the subtler and hence more insidious discriminatory and exclusionary discourses that abound' (*ibid.*: 94).

One of the more positive findings of my research into media coverage of women politicians in the 1990s was that media consumers are more than capable of resisting overt sexism, as demonstrated in my discussion of reactions in the 'Letters' pages to a deeply misogynist profile by Simon Hattenstone of the then Shadow Home Secretary Ann Widdecombe that appeared in the *Guardian* (21 June 1999) in which he described her as an alien-like giant bosom on non-existent legs (Walsh, 2001: 46). Catherine Hakim (2011: 216), in her controversial book *Honey Money*, argues that the rise of social networking sites like Facebook has increased further the 'aestheticised' nature of mediatized political discourse noted by a number of commentators (Fairclough 1995; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996, Choudliaraki 2000): 'With endless photos of people in newspapers and magazines, on TV and websites, people's physical appearance and style become far more dominant elements of their public persona', but she acknowledges that the appearance of female politicians is often judged according to more exacting standards than that of their male counterparts (*ibid.*: 223). At the same time, the rise of new media platforms has arguably led to the increasing democratisation of the public sphere and I would like to consider what effect, if any, this has had on the way women in politics represent themselves, and are represented by others *outside* of what Ross (2003) refers to as the 'malestream' media.

1.2 Comparative media coverage of the legacies of Hillary Clinton and Margaret Thatcher

By coincidence, 2013 occasioned a retrospective assessment in a wide range of old and new media of the achievements and legacies of two of the most prominent female leaders in the western world: Hillary Rodham Clinton, who stepped down in February of 2013 from her role as US Secretary of State, and Margaret Thatcher, who sadly died on 8 April 2013. Both had attained the status of elder stateswomen and I will suggest that there has, as a result of their admirable staying power, been evidence amongst media commentators of a good deal of revisionism, softening the edge of past criticisms of some of their less popular qualities and policies. In the early days, both were consistently portrayed in the media as 'unfeminine' in terms of their alleged aloofness of manner and confrontational leadership styles. Likewise, both had undergone the requisite makeover that women in public life seem to have to accept in order to be perceived as credible, although presumably *not* truly authentic, political actors.

One of the major differences between the two leaders, aside from their opposing *political* ideologies, is that Hillary Rodham Clinton was, and is, a self-confessed feminist and tireless campaigner for the rights of women and children, whereas Baroness Thatcher was an anti-feminist who prided herself on offering no special favours to other women. As Toril Moi (1989) notes, there has been a tendency to conflate 'femaleness' and 'feminism', sexual identity and gender politics, despite the fact that many women leaders, most notably Margaret Thatcher in the British context, have employed leadership styles that have been positively antithetical to feminist and authentic leadership (AL) goals (Gardner *et al.* 2011). In spite of this key difference, neither Clinton nor Thatcher has been immune throughout her political career from the kind of negative and gender-inflected media coverage that most female political leaders receive from the almost exclusively male-dominated political commentators on both sides of the Pond.

1.3 Retrospective coverage of Hillary Rodham Clinton's career and legacy:

Rather than being depicted as 'the evil power behind the throne', which is how she was often seen when her husband was President (Bernstein, 2007: 219), Hillary Clinton was described as 'the popular former First Lady' (*Sky News*, 2 February 2013) in the coverage of her decision to stand down as Secretary of State, reflecting approval ratings for her performance of this role of almost 70%. Yet, in spite of having had a long political career in her own right, and one which post-dates her husband's, and despite being urged by supporters to stand for the forthcoming presidency in 2016, she is *still* being defined here in 2013 in relational terms as the ex-President's wife, a common pattern in media profiles of women leaders (Walsh 2001: 45). Hillary Clinton had foreseen this as a potential problem, and had insisted on maintaining her maiden name in the early days of her marriage and Bill's political career on the grounds that 'It showed I was still me', but this attracted a great deal of opprobrium from Republican opponents and the right wing media (Bernstein 2007: 156-7), causing her to abandon this strategy, albeit reluctantly. When Clinton decided to pursue her own political career, however, she felt confident enough to revive her 'maiden' name, but this was then viewed as revisionist and thus suspect amongst some media commentators (Walsh 2001: 41), especially since it appeared to be in tension with her ultimate acceptance of the need to abandon her thick spectacles and to tame her unruly hair. Indeed, 'hair' is something of a leitmotif in media coverage of female political leaders the world over, as is evident from the numerous references Hillary Clinton has made over the years to the media obsession with *her* hair. In his biography of her titled, somewhat ironically in this context, *A Woman in Charge*, Carl Bernstein (2007: 33) notes that: 'It [her hair] was as strong-willed as she was'.

Although her feminist sympathies have made her less readily assimilable to the norms of masculinist mediatized politics than Thatcher, Clinton's natural warmth and sense of humour have been acknowledged even by some of her fiercest media critics. For instance, Dick Morris, a former friend-turned-critic, Fox commentator and Murdoch columnist, compares her favourably to her superficially more charismatic husband: 'Unlike him she's a normal human being, with emotions. She is capable of love and affection and caring and compassion and warmth and empathy in a way that he is simply not' (cited in Bernstein 2007: 274). Her successor as Secretary of State, John Kerry, paid a light-hearted, but nonetheless flattering, tribute to her when he said he had 'big heels to fill' (*Telegraph*, 4 February 2013), while *The Huffington Post* website included sixty five reasons to love her on her sixty fifth birthday (26 October 2012). In an interview in *Elle* magazine (April 2012), itself a female-oriented publication outside the political mainstream, Clinton herself offers an explanation for the recent dramatic increase in her media capital: 'There's a certain consistency to who I am and what I do, and I think people have finally said, "Well, you know, I kinda get her now"'. The folksy use of 'kinda' here only serves to underline her refreshing down-to-earthness, in spite of being, perhaps, the most powerful woman on the planet.

1.4 Retrospective coverage of Margaret Thatcher's career and legacy:

The charge of lack of authenticity repeatedly levelled against Margaret Thatcher throughout her political career and resurrected again in recent obituaries and reviews of her legacy can be attributed in part to the complex ways in which she had to negotiate a role for herself in the early 1970s within an even more male-dominated political establishment than the one Hillary Clinton had to face. The epithet of 'milk snatcher' that greeted her decision as Secretary of State for Education to withdraw free milk from 8-12 year olds chimed with the news frame of 'bad mother' which is often used to criticise successful women who appear to put career before family, leading *The Sun* newspaper to declare her to be 'The Most Unpopular Woman in Britain' (25 November 1971). While such criticisms might seem out of step with the current climate of greater gender equality, this is called into question by a recent headline in *The Times* (28 May 2013) featuring an article about Thatcher's legacy carrying the reactionary subtitle 'a better politician than wife and mother', and by the fact that the influential Mumsnet website invited postings after her death on whether or not she had been a 'good' mother. One cannot imagine any such question being asked about the legacy of a senior *male* politician in relation to his fulfilment, or otherwise, of his paternal role.

Negative criticisms of Thatcher's policies, many of which undoubtedly proved extremely detrimental to the very fabric of British society, have nonetheless been framed in highly

personal and overtly gendered terms. For instance, the song 'Ding Dong the witch is dead' from *The Wizard of Oz*, reached the number two slot in the charts after an online campaign by her opponents, marking her slide from 'bad mother' to 'witch' in the course of over forty years. This illustrates the way in which new media platforms can help to perpetuate, as well as contest, folklinguistic stereotypes about women in leadership roles. A concept of 'authentic leadership' (AL) that relies on being true to one's principles at all costs, something Thatcher prided herself upon, is not a positive quality if it equates to dogmatism and intransigence, as I would argue it did in Thatcher's case, irrespective of the consequences for others. In the end, Thatcher combined a masculinist authoritarianism with reactionary femininity, without the benefit of a self-deprecating sense of humour, a combination which perhaps explains why she is more likely than not to suffer from a media *deficit* than other female political leaders of her era. On a more positive note, Mrs Thatcher's well-groomed appearance was often compared favourably to the more unkempt appearance of her contemporary, Labour's Shirley Williams, although this also had the unfortunate corollary of setting the very few women politicians who did have ministerial briefs in the 1970s against each other. Thatcher's spray-held hair functioned as an apt metonym for her legendary control of her prime ministerial brief.

1.5 The foregrounding of the physical appearance of women in public life:

Even relatively positive allusions to the physical appearance of women leaders can detract attention from what they actually have to say. Thus Theresa May, the current British Home Secretary and the second most powerful woman in Britain after the Queen, at least according to a recent survey by BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*, expresses her frustration about the constant self-surveillance in which she has to engage because of the reputation she has acquired for donning glamorous shoes: 'This is not something that defines me either as a woman or a politician, but it comes to define me in the eyes of the newspapers' (*Mail* 19 November 2010). However, in the same article she deftly intimates that this topic sometimes serves as a useful icebreaker in political meetings. Referring to the media coverage of the leopard-print shoes she wore when making her first speech as the Chairman of the Conservative Party, she commented: 'it is frustrating that they missed the reason why I was there – as the first female *chairman* of a major political party' (*ibid.*, my italics) and she goes on to say that she now feels unable to wear 'boring' shoes lest these attract unfavourable comment. This obsession with the sartorial choices made by women in public life led the Fawcett society to employ the hashtag '#viewsnotshoes' in its campaign to invite postings to

Twitter about perceived sexist coverage in new and old media of women politicians in the lead-up to the forthcoming British General Election in May 2015.

Mary Robinson, the first female President of Ireland and ex-UN Commissioner for Human Rights, cites a telling anecdote about the pressure for women leaders to attend to their appearance in her recent memoir *Everybody Matters*. She recalls how a male colleague, Jim Kemmy, took her aside and said:

“Mary, if you’re going to do this seriously, you’re going to have to tidy yourself up. You need to get yourself a makeover”. Part of me was laughing at the idea that Jim, in his rumpled suit, was counselling *me* on matters of sartorial elegance; and part of me realised that I must indeed have an image problem: my hair needed styling, I wore minimal make-up, and my clothes were dark and lawyerly. Against my natural inclination not to bother much with how I looked, I would have to take Jim seriously.

(Robinson 2012: 134)

What this illustrates is the double standard whereby the appearance of male politicians attracts far less critical comment from the media, with the result that women with serious political ambitions have to subject themselves to more critical self-scrutiny than their male peers. Holmes (2006: 35) refers to the ‘tightrope of impression management’ that women have to walk in order to reconcile the idea that they are both professionally competent *and* feminine. The sartorial effort very able women, such as Robinson and May, feel obliged to invest in their hair, clothes and shoes could, perhaps, be more fruitfully invested in innovative policy making or simply in getting on with the job.

1.6 The British Coalition Government – an exclusive male club?

A number of media commentators have referred to the current Coalition Government in Britain as an exclusive male club, with only five women ministers in the Cabinet, down from six during Gordon Brown’s premiership, and eight under Tony Blair’s. It seems that the situation has gone backwards in terms of achieving a more equitable gender balance in political decision-making at the highest levels in British society and this has been reflected in policy terms by budget cuts that have disproportionately affected women (Fawcett Society website). As Home Secretary, Theresa May occupies a so-called ‘hard’ portfolio role, which makes a refreshing change from the ‘soft’ portfolio roles so often occupied by women. Yet, in a recent article by the columnist Allison Pearson (*Telegraph*, 21 December 2012) she quotes a senior Tory friend who claims that half of May’s colleagues expected and wanted her to fail because she *is* a woman. Pearson goes on to describe May in stereotypically relational terms as ‘a sensible, high-minded older-sister to a pack of younger boys’ (*ibid*).

On the one hand, this article exposes Party sexism, yet is simultaneously complicit with the idea that women should perform the role of civilisers of unruly male-gendered spaces, another burden to add to the already demanding ministerial brief they are expected to master.

The unruliness of the 'boys' led by David Cameron has been evident on a number of occasions on the floor of the House of Commons. During one notorious exchange with the Shadow chief secretary to the Treasury, Angela Eagle, Cameron told her to "Calm down dear" (27 April 2007), an intertextual allusion to a highly patronising catchphrase used by Michael Winner in a well-known advertisement for an insurance company. In another exchange with the backbench MP Nadine Dorries (7 September 2011), Cameron said he understood that the honourable lady felt 'frustrated', a comment that was immediately greeted by predictable schoolboy sniggers and guffaws from some male MPs. Although the Prime Minister later apologised to Dorries, interestingly via a text message, the damage had already been done. She later retaliated by dismissing Cameron and his Chancellor, George Osborne, in her blog as 'arrogant posh boys who don't know the price of milk', a highly pejorative slur which was by virtue of this fact recycled in a wide range of media. This illustrates the way in which backbench MPs have learned to use new media platforms, notably blogs and Twitter, to overcome the highly circumscribed speaking rights afforded to them in the Commons (Shaw 2006), thereby acquiring the kind of 'interactional power' (Mills 2000) that enables them to punch above their weight. A subsequent claim by Cameron that he is in touch with the mood of ordinary voters has been mocked mercilessly by a campaign on Twitter using the hashtag '#keep it real'. A flavour of these subversive tweets can be found in the contribution of janeymode who claims that '#cameronkeepsitreal by wearing his deerstalker at a jaunty angle and saying "innit though" in response to questions in Parliament'.

According to Deborah Cameron (2007: 127): 'The House of Commons is a peculiarly Martian institution'. Rather than 'civilising' the Commons as some media commentators had expected after the success of 'Blair's Babes' during the 1997 General Election, Sylvia Shaw (2006) has found that women MPs have accommodated themselves to the prevailing adversarial norms, with one significant difference: they rarely make 'illegal' interventions. Shaw found that men made nearly ten times as many illegal interventions as women. Once these were counted, women's overall contribution shrank to two-thirds of the men's total, thereby denying them both visibility and influence. It's not that they choose to adopt a less adversarial style; rather it is because they are perceived as 'outsiders within' that they do not feel secure enough to break the rules: 'To the extent that their behaviour is different from

men's, it is not because they have a different style, but because they have a different status' (Cameron 2007: 130).

1.7 The British Coalition Government – an inclusive club?

In one respect at least, the Coalition Government appeared to be progressive in its choice of Sayeeda Warsi as the first female Muslim to serve in the Cabinet, but in retrospect in an instance of what has been termed the 'glass cliff' phenomenon (Ryan and Hasslam 2005), she was set up for a fall, given the widespread perception that hers was a wholly tokenistic appointment in a Party that is hostile to any form of positive action. She had been unsuccessful in her bid to win a seat as the Conservative candidate for Dewsbury in 2005, but was nonetheless appointed as the youngest ever peer by the Prime Minister in 2007 and was promoted three years later to the role of co-Chairman of the Conservative Party. The novelty value of this appointment meant that she accrued considerable media capital at first, with interviews in which she appeared in almost all of the national newspapers and broadcast media.

When this honeymoon period ended, the right wing media reported with relish the 'roasting' she was said to have been given by the 1922 Committee for allegedly mishandling the defection of the MEP Roger Helmer to the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Under the headline 'Tories give Warsi both barrels', *The Evening Standard* (8 May 2012) quoted several of her colleagues who, it claimed, were queuing up to condemn her. Among the anonymous comments were several that called into question her competence to do the job: "She has got no idea" and "I just thought she was out of her depth" and, most telling of all, was one that was intended to be a calculated put-down because of the evident distaste of the MP in question at the way in which she had been fast-tracked into her role: "If she had been an experienced Member of Parliament it would never have happened. This young lady thinks she knows everything and is the best thing to emerge in Parliament but she is not". Not surprisingly, and in spite of her public plea to keep her job on the grounds that she ticked all the boxes of gender, ethnicity, class and regional origin (*Telegraph*, August 31 2012), Warsi was unceremoniously sacked and was subsequently assigned the dubious role of Minister without portfolio. This provides an object lesson in how *not* to achieve the status of a credible female political leader in a Party in which many regard positive action as tantamount to cheating, as became clear from the triumphalist tenor of media coverage, most notably that produced by right wing political commentators of both sexes.

1.8 A Twitter backlash against retro-sexist coverage:

The coverage in *The Daily Mail* of the female MPs promoted in the Coalition Cabinet reshuffle (15 July 2014) provoked a strong negative reaction on Twitter from commentators of both sexes and all political persuasions. In the article, the *appearance* of the successful candidates is thematised at the expense of their professional expertise and political experience. For instance, the strapline on the inside double-page spread of the paper dubs the new Employment Secretary, Esther McVey, as 'The Queen of the...Catwalk', followed by a sexualised description of her by the Political Editor James Chapman as 'sashay[ing]' into Downing Street offering a glimpse of her 'thigh-high slit skirt'. The stereotypical femme/frump dichotomy is invoked by pitting McVey against Liz Truss, the new Environment Secretary, whose outfit is deemed to be 'a little bit too Eighties air hostess'. It is not uncommon for the identities of women politicians to be reduced to sartorial metonyms, suggesting that they add a superficial splash of colour to the generally grey-suited Westminster scene (Walsh 2001: 45). Lakoff (1995: 45) points out that the disproportionate focus on women's appearance is effectively a form of silencing, since it deflects attention from what they are actually *saying*. The scare quotes around the alliterative collocation 'Cameron's cuties' in the headline in the online version of the story does not absolve *The Mail* from the charge of retro-sexism, on the grounds that the tone is one of postmodern irony, not least because of the intertextual resonance of this phrase to the infamous caption about 'Blair's Babes' that accompanied the inset photograph of Labour's record 101 MPs in the 1997 General Election (*The Mail* 8 May 1997). The effect of such coverage, I have argued, is to impose a synthetic identity on women MPs, an identity that has made it difficult for them to be taken seriously as politicians of conviction (Walsh 2001: 43). Nick Clegg's witty tweet of a photo of himself in a suit, with the accompanying message: 'What I wore in the office today. Fingers crossed the Mail approves. Hope I don't look too '80s cabin attendant', was an effective and timely riposte which demonstrates the need to recruit men to the campaign for greater gender equality in politics (Schacht and Ewing 2004). That such support is increasingly forthcoming is evident in the many high-profile men who have endorsed the 50/50 campaign for the equal representation of men and women in the UK Parliament.

Likewise, the Labour MP for Walthamstowe, Stella Creasy, was an outspoken supporter of the freelance journalist and feminist campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez, who received a barrage of hostile tweets over the course of twenty-four hours in 2013, including threats to rape and kill her, after she successfully campaigned to have Jane Austen's image appear on the forthcoming £10 bank note in 2016. The current Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, lent her endorsement to Ms Criado-Perez's campaign. Cooper commented: 'The response by Twitter has clearly been inadequate and fails not only Caroline, but many

women and girls who have faced similar abuse on your social network' (*Guardian*, 29 July 2013). Cooper's campaign has helped to ensure that Twitter have in place mechanisms ensuring that feminist campaigners can report hostile trolls.

1.9 Conclusions:

I hope to have shown that female political leaders continue to be judged according to different and often more taxing standards than their male peers by largely male or male-identified political commentators within the mainstream media. However, new media platforms have the potential to enable feminist-identified women and feminist-identified men to monitor, contest and bypass, at least to some extent, the interpretative control of masculinist mainstream media, promoting an alternative model of authentic leadership (AL). Positive developments include the presence of the websites of the Fawcett Society, and the Centre for the Advancement of Women in Politics' (CAWP), the latter being linked to Queens University Belfast and offering an excellent resource for providing up-to-date statistics on the presence, or otherwise, of women in a range of political institutions within Northern Ireland, Britain and Ireland. Cross-party challenges to sexism in both political and media institutions have been spear-headed by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Women in Parliament.

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